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The arbre-tree sign

Citation for published version:

Joseph, J 2017, 'The *arbre*-tree sign: Pictures and words in counterpoint in the *Cours de linguistique générale*', *Semiotica*, vol. 217, no. 1, pp. 147-171. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2016-0040>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1515/sem-2016-0040](https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2016-0040)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Semiotica

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John E. Joseph

The *arbre*-tree sign¹: Pictures and words in counterpoint in the *Cours de linguistique générale*

1 Introduction

To be truthful, during the first twenty minutes of viewing the film, I, who have been thirty years in this business of making films, did not know what it was all about. I may be dumb, but I have asked at least fifty people who in more or less articulate form described the same experience.

Erich von Stroheim, review of *Citizen Kane*, 1941

We contributors to this special issue of *Semiotica* marking the centenary of the *Cours de linguistique générale* (CLG) are poorly placed to understand how difficult the book appeared to its early readers. Even if we recall the trouble we ourselves may have had with it on our first reading – as a teenager, in my case – we were nevertheless already in an intellectual atmosphere that the book had gone a long way toward shaping. By now, after countless rereadings, it appears to me the very model of clarity of thought and expression, putting forward a vision of language so obvious that I am surprised when others find it hard to follow or read it differently from me. But it happens.

My initial instinct is to correct their (mis)interpretations by having recourse to the text or its source materials. But linguists are not lawyers, nor divinely inspired, and the texts we write will always give rise to multiple readings. This is particularly so with the CLG, given its complex authorship. In some instances, interpolations by Bally and Sechehaye arguably run counter to what Saussure was struggling to articulate (on the editing process see further Sofia 2015); nevertheless it is hard to accept Bouquet's (1997) judgement that the editors botched the job. One can only look with awe upon the success they made of a task that any sober prediction would have deemed impossible.

Their decision to include illustrations in the text is a case in point. The illustrations are a double-edged sword. By offering a second modality for readers to comprehend novel and challenging theoretical concepts, Saussure at the blackboard, then Bally and Sechehaye at the editing table, extended a hand to students and readers to guide them into his conceptual world via the stepping-stones of the semi-familiar, accessible and 'concrete', insofar as that term is used to distinguish what can be readily visualised from what resists such depiction (the ambiguities of 'concrete' and 'abstract' are examined in Chapter 9 of Joseph 2016).

Given that first-time readers of the CLG still find it daunting (whereas even young children no longer have trouble with the structure of *Citizen Kane*, so completely did it remake the language of cinema and later television and video games), they grasp the extended hand with relief. Once delivered to the stepping-stones of the semi-familiar, they do not always make the next step of returning to the complexities of the text. Even if they do, and find that the text suggests contradictions with what they have understood from the illustrations, they may not readjust their understanding of the

¹ My main title is a bow to Levin (1989), which, as noted on its first page, began as a paper he gave in 1985 at the University of California at Davis, in which he argued unforgettably that the idea of the linguistic sign being arbitrary came to Saussure when, having drawn a tree to illustrate a point about language (see below, Section 4), he started to think about the French and English words for it: *arbre*, tree, *arbre*-tree, arbitree ... arbitrary. Although Levin's published paper contains no mention of this, or indeed of the word *arbre*, its ghost haunts his paper's title – and now mine.

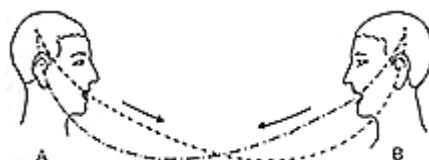
illustrations, but instead interpret the text to accord with that understanding, somehow accommodating the seeming contradictions.

If they emerge with a Saussure that works for them, that is not to be discounted. They read the *CLG*, or assign parts of it to their students to read, for a reason, generally involving some concept, model or technique they are promoting or contesting or just striving to understand. Theirs will always be a partial Saussure, in both senses of the word. That is inevitable. The job of those of us who have made the *CLG* one of our specialisms is to help guide them toward our best understanding of Saussure's teaching, when what they seek is a textually 'authentic' Saussure, whether the authenticity is to the *CLG*, its source materials (referred to in this paper by the numbers given to them in the critical edition of the *CLG* by Engler, conventionally abbreviated to *CLG/E*) or earlier abandoned manuscripts. Yet no reading, however well-documented, is the sole legitimate one. Any such monopolistic claim needs to be contested quite as much as do interpretations with no textual basis.

Starting from that premise, I shall examine seven of the illustrations or sets of illustrations in the *CLG* and the various interpretations to which they have given or could give rise, treating these not as erroneous but as contrapuntal to the text when the two appear to be in contradiction. These are by no means all the illustrations in the *CLG*; for reasons of space I have left out those in Parts Three and Four (there are none in Part Five), and in the earlier parts have limited myself to those that have had the most impact on readings of the book.²

2 The talking heads and the speech circuit

The first illustration in the *CLG* (Introduction, Chapter 3, p. 27) is the famous one of two heads, labelled A and B, facing each other, with dotted lines connecting the centre of one cranium to that of the other. One line passes through A's mouth and B's ear, the other through B's mouth and A's ear.



This is a case where we find a clear gap between the notebooks of Saussure's students (*CLG/E* 196) and what is in the *CLG*, both in the verbal text and in the illustration. The most careful of the student notes, those of Émile Constantin (IIC 266), say simply:

Let us consider, within the diverse spheres in which language moves, the special sphere that corresponds to what is for us a language.

These spheres have to be observed in the *individual act*. The individual act in the case of language supposes two individuals. We shall then have in complete form what can be called the speech *circuit*.³

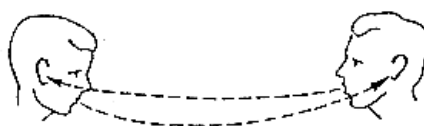
² For interesting perspectives on the full range of illustrations in the *CLG*, see Kim (2008), Christensen (2016).

³ Original: "Considérons dans les sphères diverses où se meut le langage la sphère spéciale qui correspond à ce qui est pour nous la langue. / Ces sphères ont à être observées dans l'acte individuel. L'acte individuel quand il

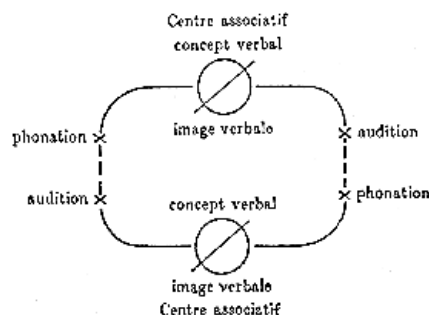
But the *CLG* (p. 28) adds much more:

The starting point of the circuit is in the brain of one of them, for example *A*, where the facts of consciousness, which we shall call concepts, get associated with the representations of linguistic signs or acoustic images serving to express them. [...]he brain transmits to the organs of phonation an impulse correlative to the image; then the sound waves are propagated from *A*'s mouth to *B*'s ear [...]. Then the circuit is prolonged in *B* in an inverse order: from the ear to the brain.

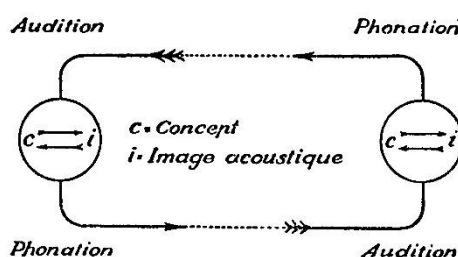
The brains of the speaker/hearers do not come into what Saussure told his students, either in words or in the picture he drew, which his students copied thus (*CLG/E* 198):



– and which Saussure immediately followed up with this diagram:



The accompanying text makes clear that Saussure's point is to distinguish between what is physiological (phonation and audition) and what is "psychic" (concept and image); and also what is external (sound waves), all the rest being internal. In the *CLG* (p. 28) this diagram gets turned 90 degrees, the associative centres are removed and, most significantly, the two split circles labelled "verbal concept / verbal image" are condensed and modified.



Both the student notes and the published *CLG* point out that the diagram is incomplete, since, for example, a "muscular image" needs to be included for phonation, as an intermediary between the acoustic image and the nerve signals sent to the speech apparatus for producing sounds. Each of the

s'agit de langage suppose deux individus. On aura ainsi au complet ce qu'on peut appeler le circuit de la parole" (my translation, as are those that follow). I have given a more literal rendering of the *CLG* passages than is found in the published translations by Baskin and Harris.

changes introduced in the published version of the diagram is potentially significant, the more so because this is the first appearance of Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign (not counting its appearance in Odier 1905, on which see Joseph 2005). As will be seen in Section 4 below, the fact that the concept and acoustic image lie side-by-side, rather than one atop the other, ought to matter for Lacanian readers; and the arrows going between them in both directions, suggests that their relationship is a dynamic, not a static one. The use of the single-letter abbreviations *c* and *i* within the circles, accompanied by a key in which the terms *concept* and *image acoustique* are in the singular, not the plural, strengthens the impression that the contents of the two circles are identical in speaker and hearer; the fact that *image verbale* and *concept verbal* appear twice in Saussure's diagram makes the viewer less inclined to assume that they must be the same.

The most consequential change is perhaps the dropping of *verbal* following *concept*. The *CLG* text does not specify what is meant by *concepts* other than to call them *les faits de conscience* [the facts of consciousness], whatever that may mean. For Saussure, this conceptual side of the linguistic sign, for which he eventually uses the term *signifié* [signified] (p. 99), is not only specifically verbal but bound to a particular signifier in a particular language. A concept as a fact of consciousness that you or I may have and for which there is no word is not a signified, not a verbal concept; signifier and signified only come into being together. This is the point of the rejection in the *CLG* (p. 97) of a language as a "nomenclature", the idea that the meanings of words exist before names are attached to them. That is such a powerful way of understanding how language works that probably still today even most linguists take it for granted that, *contra* Saussure, meanings precede the creation of signs to designate them.

Roy Harris located the "classic application" of what he called the "sender-receiver model of communication" in the *CLG* (pp. 27-29), contrasting its "segregationism" with Harris's own integrationism. In Joseph (1997: 24-28) I laid out in detail how, in reading the passage on the speech circuit, Harris inserts assertions about what each statement from the passage "implies" that are plausible (taken out of context) but by no means necessary. Without citing my paper, Harris (1998) made it explicit that his reading of this passage is indeed a complete tissue of implications:

Saussure's model is segregationist through and through. To see this, we have to realize that the model has certain implications that are not immediately apparent in Saussure's initial presentation of it. The most important are as follows.

1. The model implies that communication is "telementational", i.e. that communication is a process of thought-transference from one person's mind to another's.
2. The model implies that communication is successful only if the concept that originally triggered the start of the process in A's brain is the same as the concept that is eventually triggered in B's brain. [...]
3. This matching requirement in turn implies that for successful communication a fixed code must be in operation. [...] (Harris 1998: 21)

Out of context, Harris's interpretation of the *CLG* passage is not an impossible one; but by no means is it the only possible one. The *CLG* passage is explicitly enquiring into the place of *langue* within the more general sphere of *langage*, and says nothing about communication, what successful communication consists of, or about the concept in A's brain being the same as the one in B's. The terms "telementational" and "fixed code" do not appear here or elsewhere in Saussure; they are

Harris's. The word "transmission" is used in the *CLG* (p. 28), but only with reference to the process that takes place within each individual, for instance as the acoustic image is translated from the speaker's brain to his speech organs. Between speaker and hearer, all that occurs is "the purely *physical process*" (p. 28, emphasis in the original) of sound waves being propagated from A's mouth to B's ears. The emphasis on the words "purely *physical*" — i.e., not mental — confutes Harris's "telementational" interpretation. All that the passage implies about communication is that, when I am the one talking, I start with a concept, which triggers a sound pattern that is likewise psychological and that then gets realised as spoken sounds via muscular movements; and that when I am the one listening, I hear sounds via physical movements transmitted into nerve signals, which are then processed as sound patterns and associated with concepts. The point is to lay out the order in which these things occur, as a preliminary to locating where exactly the *langue* fits into the picture. This is even before we get to the fact that Saussure's own drawing has dotted lines connecting each head's mouth to the other's ear, with the brain literally not in the picture at all. Relevant materials from the Saussure manuscripts in the Harvard Houghton Library published by Linda (2000) make it all the more apparent that the speech circuit is about, not communication, but what goes on within an individual.

Harris's belief that Saussure had a "theory of communication" may have derived from the decision by the editors of the *CLG* to extend the lines in the talking heads figure to join the heads' ears and mouth to their brain. Bally and Sechehaye likely assumed that the text made it sufficiently clear that what happens within and between the heads is so totally different in character, there was no need to mark a distinction between Saussure's original lines and their extensions. If so, they underestimated the power of the visual image.

3 The collective model of *langue* (but not *parole*)

Introduction, Chapter 4 of the *CLG* (p. 38) illustrates the "collective model" of *langue* thus:

$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 \dots = I$$

The point Saussure was trying to make appears to be that the *langue* of individuals "adds up" to a collective singularity. The Roman I to the right of the equal sign is a deviation from the students' notes (*CLG/E* 38), which have an Arabic 1 there, although in one set of notes (Georges Dégallier's, D208) this 1 is bigger than those to the left of the equal sign. In Constantin's notes (IIC 308b), as in Marguerite Sechehaye's (S2.17), all the 1s look alike.

The Roman numeral I suggests that the collective *langue* is both the same as, and yet different from, the *langue* in the brain of each individual member of the community. The I can be understood either as the *langue* of an individual blown up to giant size, in line with Archer's (1988) "upward conflation" model of society, or the 1 can be understood as the collective I in microcosm, in line with Archer's "downward conflation" model. Readers interpret the illustration in the *CLG* according to how they already imagine society to be constituted. For many readers, however, it must seem a strange, metaphysical mathematics in which an endless series of 1s add up to a one written differently (or indeed to 1, as per what Saussure drew on the blackboard). It may also seem to be in counterpoint with what the *CLG* says concerning the letter *t* (Section 8 below), that however it is written does not

alter its value, so long as it is distinct from other letters. With the *t* example the point being made is about the nature of signifiers (as well as signifieds), whereas with the *l* the point is about the nature of *langue* as opposed to *parole*, but the potential for perceived inconsistency is there.

The *CLG* (p. 38) next contrasts this collective model of *langue* with the different status of *parole*, which looks like this:

$$(1 + 1' + 1'' + 1''' \dots)$$

In this case the editors have altered what is in the students' notes (*CLG/E* 361), which is:

$$1 + 1 + 1 + \dots = 1 + 1 + 1 + \dots$$

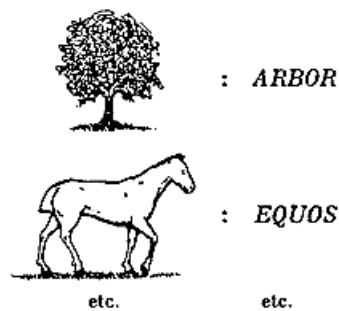
Whereas the *langue* of individuals “adds up” to a collective singularity, their *parole* remains individual and multiple. The *CLG* version appears to express the same idea, using the primes to show that the *parole* of individuals varies in a way that their *langue* does not. The editors reinforce this message in the text, where they add the word “identical” to the *langue* in the brain of each speaker, a word that does not appear in the students' notes. Saussure did use the metaphor of a dictionary deposited in each speaker's brain, which would seem to imply identity – but metaphors are by definition only ever partially true, and not to be taken literally. The diagram however provides a loud, thumping contrapuntal bass that makes it hard to hear the suggestions from the oboe that, actually, it is literally *impossible* that the *langue* possessed by every speaker in the community is identical. Yet this is the theoretical construct on which linguistic analysis has always proceeded, and that Saussure and the *CLG* are trying to clarify, rather than a novel conception being asserted axiomatically.

What are readers to make of the *parole* diagram being put in brackets (parentheses) while the *langue* diagram is not? Perhaps that there is no reality to *parole* apart from its individual manifestations – a reading that might be strengthened by the lack of an equation. But this is in counterpoint with the *CLG* text, which says that “speech [...] is *the sum* of what people say”, and again, just before the diagram, that “there is nothing collective about speech; its manifestations are individual and momentary. Here there is nothing more than *the sum* of the particular cases [...]” (p. 38, my italics) – followed by the diagram showing additions, but no sum.

4 Representing value in the linguistic sign

Valeur [value] is central to how languages are conceived in the *CLG*. A *langue* is a collection of signs, each the conjunction of a mental concept, the signified, with a mental sound pattern or sound-image, the signifier. The term “sound-image” is deceptive, though, because a signifier is not really an image, but a value. The values that signifiers and signifieds consist of are nothing other than their difference from all the other signifiers and signifieds in the language system. How do you depict *that*? The answer is that pure value cannot be pictured directly; describing it verbally is hard enough, and since it has no visual dimension, any illustration of it will of necessity be metaphorical.

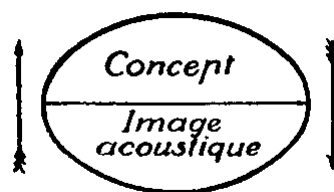
Part One, Chapter 1 of the *CLG* (p. 97) starts off with an exposition of the “nomenclaturist” view of language that Saussure rejects, and which it illustrates thus:



The nomenclaturist mistake is to think that the idea or category of *tree* or *horse* existed before it entered language through the creation of a linguistic sign. The world of phenomena is not presented to us pre-categorised; young children do not readily distinguish between large dogs and small horses, and even most adults are not sure where the line is drawn between horses and ponies, or what the scientific status is of categorical divisions among equids, the broader category of which horses are a part. So too with trees, bushes, shrubs and the like.

The *CLG* gives a Latin word for tree and horse, as Saussure did in his drawing as copied in the students' notes (*CLG/E* 1085), though the forms he gave were the pre-classical Latin *arbos* and the nominative singular *equus*, which, for some reason, the editors changed to *equos*, either an Old Latin nominative singular (in which case, why did they shift *arbos* to the classical form *arbor*?) or a Classical Latin accusative plural.⁴ Bally was a Latinist, so the change was not due to ignorance. The choice of Latin is itself not explained or remarked upon, either in the students' notes or in the *CLG*, and it is mysterious to readers, especially those who know no Latin and may not even recognise that these are Latin words. But readers who know what the words mean will still wonder why Latin was chosen; is there an implication that Latin is special in some way? They have already seen something of the sort suggested by the use of the Roman I in the illustration of the collective model of *langue*, as discussed in Section 3 above. Here, perhaps, Latin is meant to symbolise the universality of the principle being discussed.

The next illustration (p. 99) is of what Saussure considers to be the correct model for the linguistic sign – a reconfigured version of the one we have already encountered in Section 2 above:



This in turn is followed in the *CLG* (p. 99) by a pair of specific examples, placed side-by-side:



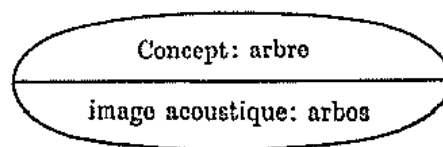
⁴ Marguerite Sechehaye's notes (S2.8) have just the drawing of the tree and the French word *arbre*, with no horse.

The acoustic image is the same in both, *arbor*, while the concept is pictured in two different ways, by the French word *arbre* in quotation marks, and by the picture of the tree repeated from the illustration of nomenclaturism on the previous page. The reader has to make an interpretative choice: are «arbre» and the picture the same signified represented two different ways? Or two different kinds of signified, a verbal one and a visual one? If different, how do they relate to one another? If the same, why give the two representations? Here is what the text says (p. 99), as it finally notes that Latin is the language being used:

Whether we seek the meaning of the Latin word *arbor* or the word by which Latin designates the concept “tree”, it is clear that only the rapprochements appear to conform to reality, and we shall put aside any other that might be imagined.

We are here offered two options for what we “seek”, after being shown two different representations. One might well expect readers to understand the text to be saying that “the word by which Latin designates the concept ‘tree’” refers to the diagram on the left, which contains «arbre», leaving “the meaning of the Latin word *arbor*” to refer to the diagram on the right – the implication being that the meaning of *arbor* is the picture of the tree. I do not think this was the editors’ intention, but it seems like a reasonable interpretation. Some of the further complexities of this pair of diagrams are explored in Jakobson (1959).

The students’ notes do not have this trio of diagrams, just a single one (CLG/E 1094):⁵



Crucially, Saussure did not draw the linguistic sign containing the picture of the tree: he used the tree and horse pictures only to illustrate the nomenclaturism that he rejected. In creating the right-hand illustration of the sign with the picture representing the signified, the editors opened up a Pandora’s box of contrapuntal readings, including ones linking the Saussurean sign to Wittgenstein’s “picture theory of meaning” in his early *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922).

More than that: many readers have come away from the CLG with the understanding that the signified in this sign is not a pure value, not a concept, not even a picture of a tree, but *actual trees*. The CLG text (p. 98) is clear that “The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image”. But the nomenclaturist view is strongly rooted, and one does not have to look far to find readings of the CLG that, often using the diagram of the sign containing the tree as an illustration, take signifieds to be what Frege (1892) called referents.

Probably the most influential reading of the sign diagrams has been that of Lacan, whose debt to Saussure, like his even greater debt to Freud, is complex and still much debated. On the one hand,

⁵ Dégallier put this figure later in his notes (CLG/E 1107, D186). A few passages earlier (CLG/E 1096), D185 and IIC 278 give a similar figure labelled *concept* and *image acoustique*, without any specific example such as *arbre*, but with a line pointing from concept to the word *spirituel* [mental], and another from *image acoustique* to *matérielle (au sens de sensorielle)* [material (in the sense of sensory)].

Lacan's widely circulated view that the unconscious is structured like a language is grounded in his reading of the *CLG*, partly mediated by how his close friends Lévi-Strauss and Merleau-Ponty read it. The three of them were jointly responsible for raising the *CLG* to the status of master-text of mid-century structuralism. From early on, however, Lacan set about critiquing, subverting and recasting Saussure's main tenets, starting with his model of the linguistic sign, which Lacan insisted must be situated in a *subject*, a human being using it for purposes of symbolising – symbols being the core matter of Lacan's psychoanalytic project. Rather than treating the sign as something static, as in the left-hand figure below, Lacan reconfigured it as the "algorithm" for the production of symbolic meaning shown on the right:

$$\frac{S}{s} \qquad f \qquad \frac{S}{s}$$

– where *S* is the signifier, *s* the signified, and *f* the algorithmic function, and with psychoanalytic importance attributed to the bar separating *S* from *s*. Lacan maintains that the right-hand figure, the algorithm, is the basis on which modern linguistics is actually founded, and he says that "The thematics of this science is henceforth suspended, in effect, at the primordial position of the signifier and the signified as being distinct orders separated initially by a barrier resisting signification" (2005 [1966]: 114). He refers to signifier and signified as "termes supérieur et inférieur" [upper and lower terms] (1966: 254), and presents this diagram of them:



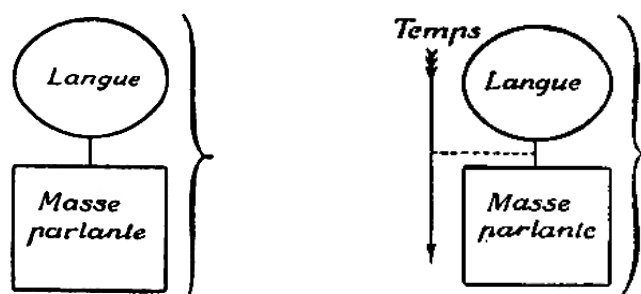
This was of course inspired by the diagram of the sign containing the picture of a tree introduced by the editors of the *CLG*, and more generally all the sign diagrams suggest a reading of signifier and signified as being in a vertical – hence implicitly hierarchical – arrangement, with a line dividing the sign in two and acting as a barrier between its component parts. Lacan has left out the oval containing them, on the grounds that this suggests a closedness to the process of generating symbolic meaning, that is in fact a totally open process. Significantly, given the importance he places on their position relative to one another, he has *reversed* the position of signifier and signified. As Lyotard (2011 [1979]: 253) would later note in critiquing Lacan,

Saussure placed the signified *above* the signifier, and the line which separates them in the schemas, far from representing repression or censorship, has so little consistency that it will tend to disappear as the notion of value will supersede that of signification in the later lectures, the signified of a term being nothing more than a summary of its *value*, that is, of its syntagmatic and paradigmatic entourage. And that entourage is not hidden, but transparent.

What is unclear and continues to inspire debate is whether Lacan's repositioning of signifier and signified was meant to show what Saussure really meant, or should have meant, or whether Lacan just remembered the *CLG* illustration incorrectly, or his drawing hand was guided by some unconscious impulse.

5 The speaking mass, language and time

Part One, Chapter 2 of the *CLG* (p. 112) contains an initial diagram of the language and the speaking mass, on the left below, which is then completed in a second diagram (p. 113) with the addition of a “time axis”.



If these diagrams have never attracted as much attention as the preceding ones (apart from the detailed study of them by Robert 2012), it may be down to the fact that the preceding chapter has stated in no uncertain terms that arbitrariness is the first principle of the linguistic sign, and what these language and speaking mass diagrams show is presented as one of the *results* of arbitrariness, and a limit upon it, rather than an illustration of the principle itself. At the same time, while it is clear enough that the oval joined to the rectangle is intended to show how the language system is anchored by the social reality of people speaking to one another, the status of the bracket and the time axis are not so well explained.

The left-hand figure appears more or less as here, with minor variations, in all the students’ notes (*CLG/E* 1288), the biggest difference being that in Constantin’s (IIIC 324) the lower rectangle is labelled *masse sociale* [social mass] rather than *masse parlante* [speaking mass]. Either way, it is Saussure’s pre-riposte to Lacan: a language as a system of signs is anchored not in a Subject, but in Society. The text accompanying the left-hand figure in the *CLG* (p. 112) says: “a *speaking mass* is necessary for there to be a language”. The curly bracket signifies the inseparability. The point about the social nature being an “internal characteristic” of language is directed against a distinction linguists regularly made, and continue to make, about internal versus external facts and forces, where external means aspects of existence that impact only indirectly on the internal workings of the linguistic system. Saussure had been even more adamant on this point in the second course (*CLG/E* 1286): “The system of signs merits consideration only as a social thing. Characteristics anterior to this coming into collectivity are unimportant. A system of signs is made properly only for the collectivity, and not for an individual”.⁶

The *CLG* (p. 113) then says that the left-hand schema still does not capture the reality of language, because it abstracts away “the march of time”. So the Time arrow is added to the right-hand schema, but in a confusing form. Why is it attached, by a dotted line, to the link between language

⁶ Notes of François Bouchardy, B15; original: “Le système de signes ne mérite pas que l’on s’y arrête qu’en tant que chose sociale. Les caractères antérieurs à cette venue dans la collectivité sont inimportants. Un système de signes n’est proprement fait que pour la collectivité, et non pour un individu”.

and the speaking mass?⁷ Is this meant to suggest that the Time arrow is itself the link between them? Why is the arrow placed in such a way that Time appears to be moving from the language to the social mass? Or is the dotted line meant to prevent readers from interpreting the arrow in that way, and to show instead that the whole conglomerate of language plus speaking mass is moving through time – in which case, why not attach the time arrow to the curly bracket?

How to deal with time was a problem that haunted Saussure from early in his career, and at times seems to have obsessed him (see Harris 1987: 199-200; Joseph 2012: 53). In the popular imagination Saussure's linguistics is about taking language *out* of the passage of time, by focussing on the synchronic system rather than historical change, or on how the system gets used in *parole*. One does not need to read very deeply into Saussure's work in order to discover that his professional interests were entirely centred on the "diachronic", his reformed version of historical enquiry based on the comparison of synchronic systems from different points in time. Nor is his semiotics meant to escape time: the second principle of the sign, after arbitrariness, is *linearity*, which is a way of imagining the unfolding of signs in time as an "internal" aspect of their nature. This is different from – and yet impossible to separate from – the unfolding in time that takes place in *parole*, when individuals use the signs in utterances. There are two different conceptions or dimensions of time involved in *langue* and in *parole*. Saussure had been aware since at least the early 1890s of contemporary philosophical and scientific developments in the understanding of time, through reading manuscripts by his brother René that dealt with the subject (see Joseph 2012: 366-368, 390). But these new concepts, such as Bergson's distinction of *temps* [time] and *durée* [duration], did not map neatly onto the different dimensions of time as Saussure perceived them inhering in *langue* and *parole*.⁸

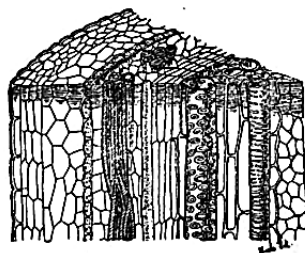
Before the addition of the Time arrow, the left-hand figure appears to be illustrating the fact that a language is not "a free system, organisable as one wishes" (p. 112), as the principle of arbitrariness might lead one to believe, because it is anchored by "the social force" (p. 113). The shapes recall a balloon that would fly free if it were not tied to the weight below it, which the ambiguous word *masse* [mass] serves to underscore. Saussure though is insistent that this would be a mere idealisation unless Time is added – producing the right-hand figure that defies visual interpretation. Is Time somehow adding to the pull that the *masse parlante* exerts on *langue*? Presumably not; nothing in the text suggests this. More likely, it occurred to Saussure that he has been leaving Time aside in *all* his illustrations. If he had been writing the *CLG*, he might well have gone back and added the Time arrow to each of the figures.

⁷ The figure with the downward-pointing arrow appears in all the students' notes for *CLG/E* 1298, but with no labels, just the oval and rectangle joined by a line, which another line joins to the arrow. In Saussure's own notes for the lecture (N23.6 [3339]), p. 9, the same figure appears, and written to the right of it is *masse parlante et temps* [speaking mass and time]. See further Robert (2012).

⁸ The words *temps* and *durée* occur in the *CLG* text shortly before the diagrams, but were an interpolation by the editors, who seem to be using them as synonyms rather than following Bergson's distinction. Bergson's work in this area went back to his doctoral thesis (1889), but it was with the success of Bergson (1907) that he became internationally known and his earlier works were widely translated. Also of interest in this context is how the linguist Gustave Guillaume, working in an avowedly Saussurean tradition, grappled with the difficulties posed by time in language (see Hewson 2008).

6 The plant stem

Part One, Chapter 3 (p. 125) shows a plant stem cut transversally, in order to “show simultaneously the autonomy and the interdependence of the synchronic and the diachronic” (p. 124):



This is strikingly different from what is in the student’s notes (CLG/E 1458), which is a very simple drawing of two slices, with none of the botanical accuracy of the CLG figure.



What Saussure drew would seem to illustrate clearly how “the point of view creates the object” (CLG, p. 23). The horizontal slice, corresponding to synchrony, and the vertical slice, corresponding to diachrony, provide two different ways of studying the same plant stem.

So why did the editors replace this with the much less straightforward image shown above? Godel (1957: 114) comments that “The figure representing synchrony and diachrony by the horizontal and vertical sections of a plant (D255-256) is accompanied by a commentary that the students took down incompletely, so that Saussure’s reasoning cannot be reconstructed with certainty”.⁹ It is true that Saussure belabours the metaphor beyond what it can usefully sustain, and speaks confusingly of the diachronic reality as a “body” (pp. 124-125).

But might the editors have been trying to mask a further problem? Slicing the plant stem vertically does not really provide the equivalent of a diachronic study of a language: that would instead be a series of horizontal slices made at different heights of the stem. What the vertical slice corresponds to is what historical linguists *imagined* they were studying, but that Saussure realised is not in fact available to study directly, in the way that a plant stem is.

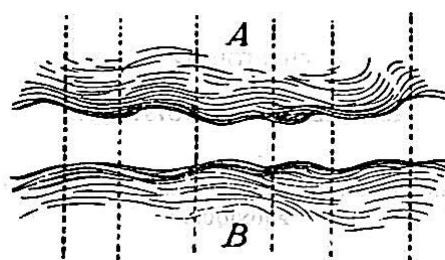
More generally, the plant stem is a risky metaphor for a language as conceived by Saussure. It is a much better metaphor for the conception he set himself against: that of a language as a “living thing”, as maintained by the linguistic “naturalists” (on whom see Desmet 1996; Joseph 2012: 377, 411). For them, a language at any given moment embodies the entire history of which it is a projection, just as a plant embodies the history of its growth. For Saussure, however, that is to misunderstand the nature of a language as a signifying system, a system of values generated by difference – nothing in the plant is comparable to that (see further Saussure 2006 [2002]: 146).

⁹ Original: “La figure qui représente la synchronie et la diachronie par les deux sections, horizontale et verticale, d’un végétal (D255-256) est accompagnée d’un commentaire que les étudiants ont noté incomplètement, de sorte que le raisonnement de Saussure ne se laisse pas rétablir avec certitude”.

But if the editors' intention was, as I am implying, to avoid any such contradiction, their inclusion of that very realistic plant stem drawing may have had the opposite effect, giving readers the visual message that a language really is like a plant, so that the metaphors often applied to languages – “living”, “dead”, “dying” and so on – come to be understood literally.

7 The floating realms

Another frequently cited illustration in the *CLG* is from Part Two, Chapter 4 (p. 156), showing how a language divides up the “floating realms” of (A) “confused ideas” or “thought”, and (B) sounds:



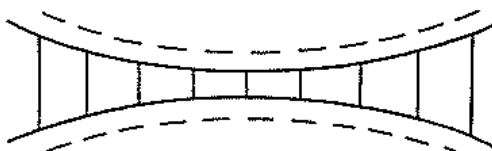
The dotted vertical lines represent how the *langue* is “a series of contiguous subdivisions”, the role of which is “to serve as intermediary between thought and sound, in conditions such that their union necessarily results in reciprocal delimitation of units” (pp. 155-156).

At first sight it is not clear what exactly this is meant to be a picture of – what is being depicted as the metaphorical equivalent of sound and thought. The *CLG* (p. 156) goes on to say:

Let us imagine air in contact with a body of water: if the atmospheric pressure changes, the surface of the water breaks up into a series of divisions, that is to say waves, and these undulations will give an idea of the union, and so to speak the coupling, of thought with phonic matter.

It seems that this refers directly to the illustration. But, if so, is A meant to be air, and B water? What then is the white space between them? What corresponds to the changing atmospheric pressure – the dotted lines, or the shape of A as the reader's eye moves from left to right? But the waves at the top of B correspond only partly to those at the bottom of A. Are both A and B water, being shaped simultaneously by a current of air represented by the white space between them?

Looking to the source materials for clarification, we do not find ready answers. The illustration does not appear in the students' notes in this form, but rather this, labelled “linguistic fact” (*CLG/E* 1827):



One student's version (S2.42) has, beneath the bottom dotted line, *masse informe* [formless mass].¹⁰ This seems like a clearer representation of the metaphor, in that the two dotted lines (apparently

¹⁰ S2.42 is also unique in the shape of the top dotted line, which is unexplained:

the floating realms of sound and thought), viewed from left to right, are moving in tandem with one another and with what is between them, which I take to be the linguistic fact; from the drawings alone one could take the dotted lines too to be part of the linguistic fact, though it is then unclear why they are dotted. The vertical lines which presumably indicate the start and end of a sign are not shown as extending outward into the floating realms, as they are in the *CLG* version. What happens in the centre stays in the centre, though the length of the verticals parallels what is happening in the twin floating realms.

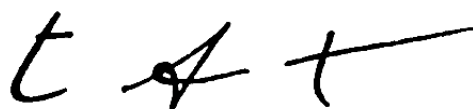
The *CLG* (p. 156) adds this comment, which reflects closely what is in students' notes from the second course (*CLG/E* 1829-30):

Thought, chaotic by nature, is forced to become precise in breaking up. Hence there is neither materialisation of thoughts, nor spiritualisation of sounds, but it is a question of this somewhat mysterious fact that the "thought-sound" implies divisions and that the language works out its units by being constituted between two amorphous masses.

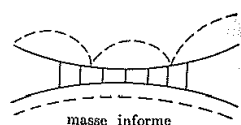
The word "divisions" links the "units of language" to the dotted vertical lines in the figure from the *CLG* – again leaving unclear what the white area between A and B is meant to represent – and this underscores the point that thought is "chaotic" before the creation of linguistic signs. That signs bring articulation to both sound and thought is a view most closely associated with Condillac, especially in the French-language tradition. No reference is made to Condillac in the *CLG* or its source materials, yet it is as though he is being channelled in this illustration, particularly in the editors' version of it, which also brings to mind the image of the "stream of consciousness", a term created by Bain (1872), the principal figure in the 19th-century associationism that has left significant traces in the *CLG* (see Joseph 2004; 2012: 304-412; 2016 and in press).¹¹

8 Ways of writing t

Introduction, Chapter 6 of the *CLG* is about writing, "its utility, its defects and its dangers" (p. 44), with an emphasis on the latter two. The *CLG* (p. 45) is emphatic that writing *represents* language, rather than actually *being* language. Yet Part Two, Chapter 4 (p. 165), on linguistic value, gives as an illustration of how value is "purely negative and differential" a picture of three different ways in which "one single person can write t":



"The only essential thing", the text says, "is that his pen distinguish this sign from that of *l*, *d*, etc.". One does not have to accept that Derrida was right about Saussure (e.g. in Derrida 1997 [1967]: 52-57) to be struck by how odd it is that, to illustrate the most fundamental notion in his conception of



¹¹ "Stream of consciousness" is generally associated with James (1890), to which the creation of the term is often miscredited.

the language system, Saussure should have recourse to writing, when he is so adamant elsewhere that it is misleading to draw inferences from writing to language proper. The editors of the *CLG* must have realised this, since they add statements to make clear that the point about the *t*'s is not about language directly, but about "that other system of signs, writing". In the students' notes from the second course (*CLG/E* 1930) Saussure is instead stressing that with writing *nous sommes dans le même ordre de choses* [we are in the same order of things] as with language. For readers of the *CLG*, the illustration is helpful in making them aware of the variation that occurs not just between one person and another, but in the reader's own practice, since everyone has the frequent experience of writing the letter *t* differently at the start or end or in the middle of a word, in cursive versus stand-alone, in majuscule and minuscule, but with it still being *t* so long as it has a vertical stroke that is crossed. On the page, this is easier to demonstrate than the variation that occurs with spoken sounds. But the price of using the letters as examples is that the illustration is haunted by that primacy of writing against which we were warned in an earlier section of the text. If writing is indeed as primary and dominant in our thinking as Saussure insists, then the earlier message will have run against the grain for many readers – whereas the illustration of the letters accords with their expectations, providing the comforting assurance that, if you really want to understand the essential nature of language, writing is the place to look after all.

9 Conclusion

For us today, the text of the *CLG* is not just the book published in 1916. It is inseparable from its later editions, source materials, translations and commentaries; from Saussure's other writings both published and unpublished; from the uses to which it has been put by later structuralists and post-structuralists; and from the vast body of Saussure interpretation, including things that have been taught or stated publicly but not published (see Note 1 for an example). All these constitute the archive of the text that is itself inscribed into the text.

As for the figures, they are as central to the text as the words are, not a secondary adjunct to them. I have tried to approach variant readings of the figures in the spirit of understanding what generated them, and what light the different readings can throw back onto the text. In the several cases where the editors of the *CLG* made significant changes to the drawings as recorded by Saussure's students – the picture of a tree used to represent the signified being probably the most consequential such change – the point has not been to show how they got things wrong, but again to infer possible motives for the changes, and to appreciate the richness of the readings they opened up.

To speak of richness in this context is not anti-Saussurean in a theoretical sense, since Saussure's conception of language is not underlain by a naïve commitment to some fixed-code theory or telementation, as read into it in Harris's maximally ungenerous, monopolistic interpretation. On the contrary, the perfectionism that emerges from Meillet's (1913: 119-120) obituary of Saussure as having paralysed him from publishing so many of his manuscripts, including all those dealing with general considerations on language, stemmed from his realisation that he could not control how others would read his lucid and elegant sentences, so as to ensure that his intended meaning came through. He had ample evidence of this from his early work, the most blatant example being Regnaud (1891). From the biographical evidence, variety of interpretation was not a richness to him,

but a problem that felt increasingly insuperable. If he did not explicitly build this into his model of the linguistic sign, the language system or the speech circuit – leaving them open to the fixed-code, telementational interpretation – he at least did not commit Harris’s out-and-out self-contradiction of proclaiming a theory in which no fixed meaning is possible while at the same time insisting that his reading of the *CLG* is the only one possible.

As mentioned in Section 7, the editors’ picture of the floating realms creates apparent links with earlier philosophical and psychological approaches to language and mind. It also links to later ones, including the “strong” version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Some readers interpret the *CLG* as maintaining that language determines thought: that the “amorphous mass” is given a rigid shape by the way in which particular languages cut up the world of thought into signifieds, leaving no room for thought without signifieds. Saussure never says anything of the sort; nor for that matter did Sapir or Whorf. It would be hard to imagine Saussure, of all people, entertaining such an idea, given how he struggled over decades to find words in which to express his vision of the language system. He was loath to introduce neologisms, and had recourse to them only when everyday words simply eluded all his attempts to make them express what he wanted. “Signifier” and “signified” appeared only in his very last lectures on general linguistics, after years of exasperation with the misunderstandings caused by sign, signal, image, concept and other terms.

If he sometimes resorted to drawings in the hope that they would eliminate the ambiguities, he may have learned that instead they opened up whole new realms of ambiguity, while strengthening the ones already present in the verbal text. Had he managed to write a book comparable to the *CLG*, one wonders whether he finally would have included any illustrations in it at all. It might have been a much longer book, with more spelling out of things to avoid ambiguity than his lectures allowed for, making it formidable to read – a book for adepts, but not one able to draw readers in, partly by the freedom it allows them to understand its meaning at various levels. One wonders whether such a book would have seen its centenary marked in the way the *CLG* has, for all its faults.

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